



Heaven, which way?

The silver thread between man and God has been pulled every which way. Some of the strands, says **Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid***, are beginning to wear a bit thin



Following 11 September 2001, the call to renew our religious discourse has been revived. The United States, in particular, has been putting pressure on the Arab and Islamic worlds to reform their educational programmes, particularly the teaching of Islam. For the past 25 years -- that is, most of my academic career -- the critique of religious discourse has been my main vocation. It is fair, therefore, to say that I am not as much concerned with the questions posed by outsiders, as with those questions which have emerged from the realities of our lives, the questions we so often dodge and defer. Some of these questions can be classified under the rubric of justice -- questions concurring human rights, women's rights and minority rights. Others stem from issues

surrounding education, freedom, democracy, and progress.

All of these questions have been pertinent to our lives since the 19th century, the era when the Arab-Islamic world experienced its own Renaissance. Yet for many reasons, we have been sidetracked, and our Renaissance has run out of steam. For many decades now, we have made little headway.

All the more reason, therefore, for us to address these questions head-on, rather than hide behind the lame excuse that we cannot act under outside pressure. Such defensiveness will not help us, for it is simply a false stand on behalf of a phoney identity. We are not to be defined in terms of backwardness and resistance to progress. We must not let ourselves be pushed into the ranks of the reactionaries, on the pretext that we are defending our religion and our identity. We have to judge our actions by our need to move ahead, to break free from outdated structures. This was the main thrust of our Renaissance, which ground to a halt before it was halfway through. We have no option but to resume the efforts begun by that movement, and seek solid ground on which to base our reforms. In order to do so, we must look into the causes of our failure and seek answers to certain old questions. In particular, we must address the question of how we may renew our religious discourse.

THE NATURE OF "RENEWAL": The question of how to renew religious discourse is preceded by two other questions. The first of these concerns the relationship of religious discourse to public discourse in the social, economic and political fields. The second question concerns the meaning of, prospects for, and caveats which condition the notion of "renewal".

Before going more deeply into either of these two questions, I should like to clarify certain premises which often get muddled in the course of such discussions. First of all, religious discourse is a human discourse, just like any other type of public discourse. It is a discourse about religion. As such, it may be a stimulus for progress and renewal, or a defence of the status quo. It may even seek the revival, without alteration and if necessary by force, of some bygone social, historical or political utopia.

Religious discourse is thus composed of various types of discourse each of which contains a different dose of critique. Naturally, that discourse which embraces progress as a goal will contain a high dose of critique, and its criticism will be addressed to the past as well as to the present. It will seek modern answers to modern problems -- problems which are inherently different from the problems which our ancestors faced. Such discourse is creative, and does not stop at criticising our own heritage, but goes on to criticise that of other cultures too -- just as our predecessors did, many generations ago.

It is totally untrue to claim that Rifa'ah El-Tahtawi, Taha Hussein, Ali Abdel-Razeq, Qassem Amin and other pioneers of critical discourse were nothing but Westernised intellectuals. Their criticism of the Western heritage was at least as acute and perceptive as their criticism of the Islamic past. They attacked mindless imitation and outdated tradition wherever they found it. Indeed, does not the Qur'an itself warn the faithful against the blind observance of ancestral practices?

The modern critique of religious discourse, as it was presented by these pioneers, was only one part of a wider public discourse whose objects also included social and political issues. The writings of Taha Hussein, Mohamed Hussein Heikal, Tawfiq El-Hakim, Khalid Mohamed Khalid, and Abdel-Rahman El-Sharqawi provide many examples of such critique. Their call for renewal was partly religious, but it extended to embrace the public realm as a whole.

Conservative discourse, on the other hand, stresses the value of the status quo and seeks to supplant critique (in this widest sense) with a pragmatic political ideology. A whole genre of writing grew up along these lines in the 1950s and 1960s, when it spread like wildfire. With titles such as "Islam and Arab Nationalism" and "Islam and Socialism", such works were totally lacking in any critical analysis. The genre continued into the 1970s, when its advocates changed tack and struck a blow instead for market-oriented policies. These authors had no trouble declaring the agrarian reform, the inheritance tax, or interest rates un-Islamic, though their confidence that currency speculation was perfectly Islamic never wavered. It was this type of discourse

Islamic, though their confidence that currency speculation was perfectly Islamic never wavered. It was this type of discourse which was used to support the Islamic investment companies, which were subsequently revealed as nothing but fraudulent pyramid schemes. Such discourse is essentially political and ideological. It is a human discourse, whose religiosity is nothing but a phoney veneer.

A timely warning is in order here. The many vocal advocates of the conservative genre will be tempted to misrepresent the motives for the current call for the renewal of religious discourse. They are likely to portray this call as a reaction to outside pressures, -- pressures created by 11 September and its ramifications. They are also likely to produce a "new" discourse of their own, which will try to dodge and mitigate these pressures, rather than addressing the real issues at hand. Indeed, much of what is published in the press nowadays suggests that this type of reaction is already well underway. In these circles, "religious discourse" is equated with sacred propaganda and the rhetoric of Friday sermons. This is wrong. Religious discourse does not consist in preaching, but in religious thought. It is a process of cognition, not a mere reference to words uttered by certain persons on such and such an occasion. Of course, the practice of preaching too is in great need of modernisation: but this is a separate issue. When I talk of religious discourse in this article, I am referring to a certain structure of thought, not to a type of rhetorical expression.

This is an important distinction. If we want to create a society which is based on freedom and justice, we will have to change the way we think. The call for the renewal of religious discourse should be seen as part of the more general call for freedom. Thought can never flourish without freedom. Free thinking is necessary for the success of any endeavour, including economic enterprises -- for everything from a small factory down to a simple chicken farm.

This word of caution brings me to the second question: namely, the meaning and scope of the concept of "renewal". (There is no reason in this context to discuss the third genre of political discourse, the utopia, in any detail. To imagine that the present should be cast in the image of the past is preposterous. This genre of discourse is an assault upon history, inheritance, and reality. Unfortunately, it is nevertheless able to attract supporters in the present climate of bigotry.)

Let me begin by borrowing Sheikh Amin El-Kholi's definition of renewal: "Renewal begins with a devastating enquiry into the past." And he adds, "ideas that are forbidden at one stage may later turn into a doctrine, a reform that takes life a step forward." This is how reform occurs, in secular as well as religious thinking. Renewal is hardly a leap in the dark or a search for the unknown. It begins from solid ground, with an exhaustive critique of the past, and proceeds to investigate what is worth keeping from that past and what must be left behind.

This means that we need to research freely into our religious legacy. This is the primary condition for renewal. We have to lift the ban on free thinking. The scope of renewal should be unlimited. There is no room for "safe doctrinal havens" which are inaccessible to critique. Such havens restrict the process of renewal. They constitute a censorship that has no place in the history of Islamic thinking. Such censorship, whenever it has appeared in the past, always inaugurated an age of stagnation and deterioration -- and not just in religious discourse. For as I have already said, religious discourse is an integral component of public discourse in its broadest sense. This has always been true in the past, and it remains true now.

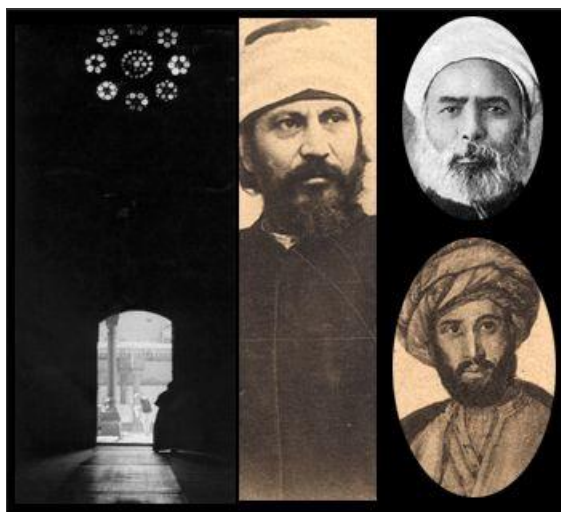
Therefore, we must let the call for renewal expand to embrace all fields of thinking and creativity. The spirit of renewal should be tolerant of idiosyncrasies, departures from the norm, and challenges to consensus. Only freedom can protect itself, and the rest of society, from decay. Only freedom can safeguard us against corruption and the phoney claims of "protecting identity and tradition". Only confident and free societies can protect themselves against stagnation and erosion. Challenges to the consensus are the only way to build a new consensus which will be capable of sponsoring progress. We have to protect the right to error in interpretation and opinion. The right to err is sacred, indeed rewarded, in Islam.

THE CRISIS OF CRITIQUE: Why is critique considered a serious crime in modern Islamic culture, whenever it tackles the historical expression of religious phenomena? Our culture is now far more resistant to criticism than it was many centuries ago. Is it because the word for criticism or critique in Arabic, *naqd*, is phonetically reminiscent of the word connoting demolition *naqdd*? It is hard to believe this could be the case. It is also hard to accept the claim that there is something inherently wrong with the "Islamic mind". To speak about an "Islamic mind" in abstraction from all constraints of geography and history, and in isolation from the social and cultural conditioning of Islamic societies, can only lead us into unrealistic, even metaphysical, speculations.

Instead, it is more realistic to look for the root of this panic reaction to critique in the crisis of modernisation and the complicated relationship between the Islamic world and the West.

Why was it all right for a 15th-century encyclopaedist, such as Jalaluddin Al-Seouti, to opine that the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Mohamed only in its content, and that the phrasing came from the Prophet himself? Today, such an idea cannot be discussed, or even mentioned.

Why is it that, when a historian mentions the well-known fact that the Prophet Mohamed failed in his preaching in Mecca, and obliged to flee with his followers (first to Abyssinia, and then to Medina), many readers will feel themselves violently offended, and the historian himself may end up in jail?



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Why is it that novels, poems, paintings, and films, may be capable of hurting religious sensibilities even before the public has had the chance to read or see them? What explains this amazing animosity towards literature and the arts, particularly the performing arts – as if Qur'anic recitals are not themselves a form of vocal performing art, and as if the Qur'an is not a refined work of literature?

And why do we impoverish our culture of theatrical and performing arts by prohibiting the personification of historic religious figures? This prohibition was originally applied to the prophets, and was later extended to include the Prophet Mohamed's disciples and the members of his family.

Does this not mean that we are somehow unable to differentiate between the figure represented and the actor, between the thought and the individual, between reality and fiction? It is as if Islamic culture is imprisoned in a realm of primitive, mythical thinking, where there is no distinction between language (a symbolic system) and the tools (symbols) it uses.

This is odd for a religious culture that has such a broad historic legacy, one that is based on the Qur'an, a book that enjoins its readers to avoid ignorance, fanaticism, and narrow-mindedness. The Qur'an opposes the ignorance, or *jahiliyah*, of the old regime, and calls for justice and freedom. The basic tenets of Islamic doctrine spawned intellectual and philosophical structures that challenged the older tenets of mythical culture. Yet, philosophy can never completely banish the spectre of myth. It can only nudge it into the margins, consigning it to the realm of folkloric perception. Thus Islamic culture seeks to deal with this impossibility by differentiating between the elite, *hasanah*, and the public, *amam*; between the cultured, *ulema*, and the commoners, *hashawiyah*; between the statesmen, *ahl al-hall wal aqd*, and the *riffraff*, *tegham*. In other words, Islamic culture has no particular faith in the democracy of knowledge and cognition.

This is where we should start our search for those faults which have led to the spread of ignorance, injustice, and tyranny. Those faults are to be found in the social history of Islam, not in its religious texts. We have to see the past of the Muslims not as a sacred history, but as a history of one section of humanity -- a history that is based on social, economic, and political factors. In analysing Muslim culture and critiquing its thought, we have to see the history of Islamic culture as a whole, and not focus selectively and uncritically on certain segments to the exclusion of all others. In the core of rationalism, we will find undeniable elements of mysticism. And at the heart of mythical tradition, we will find unmistakable evidence of rationalism. We cannot segregate the cultural edifices of our past. More importantly, we have to stop relying on the distinction that is commonly made between Islam and Muslims, a distinction which is used by many to present Islam as a pure and abstract form of perfection situated safely above the rough and tumble of geography and history. This utopian idealist Islam does not exist today, and never did exist in the past.

THE CRISIS OF MODERNISM: There are several reasons why people have attempted to differentiate between Islam and Muslims, or, to put it more accurately, between the clerical and the secular. The most recent of these reasons has to do with the imperial onslaught against the Islamic world in the late 18th and early 19th century, of which the Zionist presence in Palestine is the contemporary form. The occupation and political and economic domination of Muslim countries coincided with the elaboration of a Western political-academic discourse that came to be known as orientalism. The central claim of orientalism is that Islam is what keeps Muslim societies from modernising along European lines. The Islamic reaction to that claim, formulated during a time of political resistance to imperial hegemony, was mostly defensive, even apologetic. One example of this was the discourse of Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and his Egyptian disciple Mohamed Abduh. Their arguments segregated Islam, conceived as an abstract idea, from the present state of the Muslims, as a backward and defeated people. While absolving Islam of blame for the backwardness of the Muslims, they urged Muslims to draw strength from their religion's glorious past.

This segregation of Islam and Muslims lies at the core of the project for religious reform that was inspired by the dual European challenge: the challenge of military power that brought about occupation and material control, and the challenge of progress that led to the accusations of backwardness and cultural incompatibility with the modern world.

In the face of the first challenge, Muslims proceeded to import military technology and discipline from the West. In the face of the second challenge, they felt obliged to absolve Islam from all blame. This is why they had to differentiate between Islam the religion and their lived reality as Muslims. Muslims were backward, but Islam was not. This differentiation was an important tool. It allowed the project of religious reform, as it is expounded in the writings of Mohamed Abduh in particular, to reinterpret Islamic texts in such a way as to make them more compatible with the challenges posed by European modernity. This differentiation, however, also had a negative side. For it froze and glorified an image of the past, while condemning and criticising the present. The past had to wait for another generation before it received its share of criticism. By which time, the historic realities had become more complicated, as Islamic societies entered into an era of intellectual fragmentation and division.

In their attempt to create a rational context which would allow Muslim societies to accept and integrate modern scientific, political, and administrative methods, the reformers denounced many traditional religious practices, particularly those concerning visits by the Muslim public to the burial places of saints and the celebration of saints' days. This attitude widened the gap between the highbrow culture of the ulema and the lowbrow culture of the common people. There was something wrong in this systematic approach: the present was subject to criticism, while the past was always vindicated. With the establishment of a modern educational system that was completely separate from conventional schooling, the gap between the two cultures widened even further. As the modern educational system gained the upper hand, a new class emerged to inhabit the intermediate space between the scholars and the common folk. This new class accepted the cultural output of the scholarly classes unquestioningly, and looked down with contempt upon the uneducated commoners.

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It is remarkable that the reform movement, with its rationalism and earnest quest to establish its doctrinal authority, should have vacillated in its political stance. Although reformers routinely criticised tyrannical regimes, they were also quite happy to collaborate with them whenever they believed that this would help advance their own agenda. Political regimes often coopt intellectuals, so that their political schemes may benefit from the inner vitality of reason, at least for a while. The Abbasid Caliph Al-Maamoun, for example, supported the Al-Mu'tazilah (best known for their refusal to get involved in the feud between Sunnis and Shi'ites) against the Hanbalis (followers of Ibn Hanbal, one of Islam's leading doctrinaires), only to switch sides later. This same political volatility was to have a crucial impact on the course and doctrinal structure of religious reform.



THE CLERICAL AND THE TEMPORAL: All religions are human endeavours and Islam is no exception. Man formulates religion. To say this is not to denigrate the metaphysical. That which is metaphysical speaks in terms of the physical, and thus is transformed into social and historic phenomena. In other words, God reveals himself through man, through human language. Humans have discovered the existence of God from men who can communicate with the supernatural. It is the latter who have conveyed the words of God in a language already known to people, already in common use.

This is why, regardless of how errant and sinful we may have been, regardless of the massacres and the crimes that may have been committed in the course of our history, it is an error to classify the human realm as exclusively profane, and imagine that we are doing the divine a favour, that we are protecting it from the sins and crimes of humanity. The relation between the divine and the profane is more complex than this; and this artificial separation between the profane and the divine hampers our understanding of religious phenomena. For instance, consider the story of Satan, as told in the Qur'an, from a human and philosophical perspective. Was it not God's intention from the beginning, as He told the angels, to "create a vicegerent (caliph) on earth"? And did the angels not question the scheme, only to be rebuffed by God: "I know what you know not"?

Has God not "taught Adam all the names, then presented them to the angels, then He said: Tell me the names of these if you are right. They said: Glory be to Thee. We have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us, surely thou art the Knowing, the Wise. He said: O Adam, inform them of their names. Then, when he had informed them of their names, He said: Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of the heavens and the earth? And I know that which you disclose and which you hide"? Was this not enough for the Angels to see the wisdom of the divine plan and the superior status of Adam, God's prospective emissary to earth? The divine plan had to follow this particular course. God had to order the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam, so that mutiny (by Satan) could emerge from the midst of obedience.

Furthermore, although the original plan was for Adam to be sent to earth, God made him inhabit paradise for a while, with orders not to approach a certain tree and with a warning not to listen to Satan. Does this not mean that the divine plan, from the outset, implicitly contained the idea of evil emanating from goodness, and of both being closely linked with the human experience? Where does the profane end in this plan, and where does the divine begin? With Adam's descent into earth, evil has descended with him, along with the promise of salvation. Both are integral elements of the human condition.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that all the angels had prostrated themselves in front of Adam. How would the divine plan have evolved? How could there be good in the absence of evil? How could the divine exist in the absence of the profane? The two are integral to the human condition. Religion is an intricate blend of the divine and the profane, the godly and the human, the physical and the metaphysical. History and religion are, thus, two sides of the same coin. This is as true for Islam as it is for any other religion.

Folkloric tradition, the tradition that has been dismissed as idolatrous and polytheistic, remarkably bridges this gap between the divine and the profane, the religious and the human. Around the mausoleums of saints (symbols of the divine), it is customary to hold festivals whose commercial and earthly purposes are clear for all to see. Profane practices are common at such festivals, and are woven into the rituals of dance and sacrifice. Interestingly, this overlapping between the clerical and the temporal goes back to the tradition of pilgrimage to Mecca. The Qur'an itself clearly states that pilgrimage is more than just a religious rite, for pilgrims not only "mention the name of God on appointed days" but also "witness things that are of benefit to them." (surat al-hajj, verse 28)

REVELATION AND HISTORY: For historical purposes, one should differentiate between the stage during which a religion is being founded and its later stages. The aim of doing so is not to disassociate the earlier phase from its human and historic context, but to focus on the development of the religious phenomena. During the foundation stage, the human aspects of the revelation should be explored, so as to place the phenomenon of revelation in its historic, cultural, and linguistic context. This is the main subject of my book, *The Meaning of the Text, A Study in Qur'anic Science* (Cairo, Beirut, Casablanca: 1990). Does social and historical analysis of the foundation stage, which treats revelation as a social, historical, and cultural phenomenon, really aim to undermine Islam, as enemies of scientific thinking claim? Is there an inherent contradiction between the method of scientific thinking and the logic of faith? Can faith only evolve through the abolition of logic and scientific thinking?

There are, undoubtedly, two types of faith: one is based on trust and the absence of doubt, while the other seeks evidence and proof. The two types need not be mutually exclusive. In the history of Islamic thinking, reference has often been made to the compatibility of reliable tradition and common sense (Ibn Taymiyah), Shari'a and reality (Sophism), and Shari'a and wisdom (Ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes). Why is it that in our time people are afraid of applying scientific and philosophical

(Ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes). Why is it that in our time people are afraid of applying scientific and philosophical enquiry to matters of faith? The answer is to be found in a particular crisis that has marked the course of modern Muslim history.

The method of social and historic analysis, of which critique is a major element, can be applied to the foundation stage and to the phenomenon of revelation. It can also be applied to religious thinking at all times and in all places. Religious thinking, after all, is a human discourse about religion. It is an attempt to provide a comprehensive and coherent formulation of the creeds, morality, and jurisprudence of the revealed religious text. Was this not the task to which many Islamic thinkers (scholastics, sophists, pedants) have applied themselves? Must we not admit that both scholastic theology, *ilm al-kalam*, and jurisprudence, *fiqh*, have common points of reference? Scholastic theologians referred to their work as the science of the fundamentals of religion, *ilm usul al-din*; the jurists referred to theirs as the science of the fundamentals of jurisprudence, *ilm usul al-fiqh*; the sophists referred to theirs as the science of truth, *ilm al-haqa'iq*; and the philosophers referred to theirs as the science of inference, *ulum al-burhan*.

What we have here is a human effort to distill the material of revelation into a precise intellectual form. It would be a betrayal for scientific analysis to imagine that these intellectual efforts were conducted in isolation from the historic and social circumstances of the individuals and societies involved.

THE HUMANISATION OF REVELATION: Those who distinguish between Islam and Muslims, in the defensive and apologetic manner to which I referred earlier, overlook the fact that the Islam they discuss is the product of Muslims. The creed (the revelation and how its contemporaries understood it) was first manifested in a language that was allegorically obtuse, at least in the Meccan stage of the revelation. Religious thinkers sifted through the input and legacy of the revelation and reformulated them into a cohesive and logical pattern. They deciphered the allegorical references and reconstructed the cultural reservoir upon which this material had drawn.

Consider one of the most important elements of the revelation during the foundation stage, i.e., the creed of monotheism. Let us examine its structure in the language of revelation and see how this language developed, taking on varied dimensions and significance in religious thinking. Monotheism is a central concept in the structure of Islamic revelation. Its clearest expression is in surat al-ikhlas: "Say He is God the One, God the eternally besought of all, He begetteth not, nor was begotten, and there is none comparable to Him." We find another example in verses such as "Nothing like Him" and "Vision comprehends Him not, and He comprehends (all) vision, and He is the Knower of subtleties, the Aware." Such sayings did not stop the language of revelation from personalising the attributes of God (face, eye, side, speech, cunning, love, pleasure, hatred). In emphasising monotheism, the Qur'an took issue with older creeds, particularly with the Christian belief in a divine trinity. The Qur'an also chastised the Jews for refusing to recognise Jesus and making abusive references to the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, the Qur'an berates the Jews for calling themselves the "loved ones", but repeatedly refers to them as "favoured of God" and blames them for failing to live up to this calling.

Can we examine the creed of monotheism, in its Qur'anic version, in isolation from the attempts of Muslim thinkers (scholastics, sophists, philosophers and pedants) to formulate this creed in a cohesive form that would free it from its inconsistencies and decipher its obtuseness? In the course of this human endeavour, have the interpretations not varied with regard to this creed, as the various schools (Mu'tazilah, Ash'aris, Matridis, Hanbalis) took rival views not just on the divine traits and their relation to the essence of divinity, but also on where man fits into this divine plan? Have these thinkers not debated at length the question of freedom versus predestination, *al-gabr wal ekhtiyar*, or the creation of acts, *khalq al-af'al*?

Can we really afford to overlook the cognitive reasoning that earlier Muslims have embraced, or their obvious belief that some of the Qur'anic verses were clearer than others (with reference in particular to the seventh verse of surat Al Imran)? To what extent should we separate the interpretations given by these scholars from the letter of the Qur'an, the word from its meaning? And where do we draw the line between the allegorical language of the Qur'an and the actual creeds of Muslim sects? This is a topic that I have discussed at length in my research on *The Rational Trend in Exegesis, A Study in the Allegorical Aspect of the Koran As Seen by the Mu'tazilah* (Beirut: 1982).

The process of interpretation is not, in essence, separable from the structure of the texts involved, for it interacts humanly and historically with the texts in a way that makes any reference to a "pure text" a flight of the imagination, an attempt to deny the human aspect and disassociate it from the divine. Textual formulations are in constant need of human and intellectual interpretation, for what is comprehensible to people living in one era may not make sense to others living at a different time and in different circumstances. Where can we draw the line between the divine and the human in this ever-evolving Islamic legacy?

THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF RELIGION: The Qur'an takes clear moral and political stands against social and economic injustice. These have to be viewed in the context of life in Meccan commercial society. The Qur'an's focus on the treatment of orphans and its denunciation of those who usurp the money of orphans reflects, in that social context, the case of the Prophet Mohamed himself, who was an orphan in a society with strict patriarchal traditions. The stories of earlier prophets mentioned in the Qur'an invariably stress the conflict between the dispossessed and their masters. Prophets always champion the cause of the dispossessed, whereas the disbelievers are always cast in the role of the arrogant masters. Did not the Qur'an rebuke the Prophet Mohamed for ignoring a blind man in order to speak with the powerful men of the Qureish? Or what of the Qur'an's stern view of usury, *riba*, a practice involving the exploitation of those in financial need? The Qur'an considers usury as an extreme form of evil. Clearly, the injunction against usury is meant to protect the rights of Mecca's poor against the unjust practices of the dominant classes.

The decision to emigrate to Medina, in order to protect the Muslims from the persecution of the Qureish and gain more converts, was taken in a classical political manner, through negotiations with other tribes during the season of pilgrimage. The Qureish's attempts to have Muslim immigrants to Abyssinia repatriated and to drive a wedge between Muslims and Christians in

attempts to have Muslim immigrants to Abyssinia repatriated and to drive a wedge between Muslims and Christians in Abyssinia was one part of a political strategy to eliminate the followers of the new religion.

Careful reading of the Medina Document shows that it was a political agreement for coexistence and cooperation between the various communities of Medina (Arabs, Muslims, and Jews). This document marked the beginning of the formal recognition of Muslims as a separate group led by the Prophet Mohamed. In the Hudaibiyah Reconciliation Agreement (*Sulh Al-Hudaibiyah*), the Qureish formally recognised the community of Muslims, although they continued to deny Mohamed's status as the messenger of God.

This political transformation in the status of Muslims affected the language of the revelations. The Qur'an switches from the language of peacemaking and patience to a language that stresses the disavowal of disbelievers and encourages Muslims to declare war on them (*surat al-tawbah*). The uncovering of a secret alliance between the Jews and Mecca's infidels permitted the Muslims to alter the conditions of the Medina Document and declare war on the Jews. In all of the above incidents, not only does the revelation react to realities, it also seeks to change the course of events.

Following the foundation period of the new religion, the interaction between the political and the religious becomes all too clear. Was the Al-Suqeifah meeting (at which the first caliph was selected) religious or political? Was the choice of Abu Bakr as caliph a religious choice, or one dictated by the need to maintain a delicate political balance? And what is the meaning of Omar Ibn Al-Khattab's statement that Al-Suqeifah was "an evil that God helped us dodge?" Was Abu Bakr's appointment of Omar as second caliph religiously or politically motivated? And were the conditions, set by Omar, determining the way the committee of six was to decide on his own successor, political or religious?

The Muslims were fully aware that they were engaged in politics. The second, third, and fourth caliphs (Omar, Othman and Ali) were all assassinated for political reasons. The desire of the Khawarij (Shi'ite dissidents) for arbitration between Ali and Mu'awiyah reflected their desire to break free from the domination of the entire Modar tribe.

RELIGION AS POLITICAL TOOL: A major political split occurred in the course of the power struggle, fitnah, between Ali and Mu'awiyah. The Shi'ite movement appeared then, and gained further ground with the martyrdom of Al-Hussein Bin Ali in Karbalaa. The Khawarij sprouted several political and religious sects. The Umayyads, who acceded to the caliphate through purely political means, used religion to entrench their authority. From then on, it is impossible to ignore the complex relation between the religious and the political.

One must differentiate between the inherent and the expedient in the relation between religion and politics. Let us, for instance, consider the Umayyad and Abbasid views of the question as to whether the Qur'an is created or infinitely old. Was the Abbasid Calif Al-Ma'moun, in his determined enforcement of the Qur'an-is-created doctrine, acting out of an intellectual conviction? Or was he trying to consolidate his rule by finding an excuse to punish the Hanbalis, who had earlier staged an insurrection against his Baghdad-based military chiefs? Baghdad, at this time, was under the control of a group of corrupt military chieftains, who extracted protection money from the inhabitants, particularly the rich. Records of the inquisition-style courts set up by Al-Ma'moun to force the creed of Al-Mu'tazilah on the public show that the defendants were the same ulema accused of rebelling against the Baghdad chieftains (see Al-Tabari's History).

Is there a difference between the political use of religion in early Muslim times and what has happened in modern times? When the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the Arab rulers competed to fill the political vacuum that the disappearance of the caliphate had created. The political authorities of the time persecuted those intellectuals who argued that the caliphate was not a religious system, and had no qualms about forcing the existing religious institutions to ostracise the dissidents in their ranks. The case of Ali Abdel-Raziq, author of *Islam and the Principles of Governments* (1925), is well-known.

This alliance between political and religious institutions eventually managed to divert the course of the reform movement. Under this impact, the latter gave birth to an ancestral, or salafi, trend, led by Rashid Reda and Mohamed Abduh. The question of how a reform movement could produce such a lame traditionalist offshoot is a crucial one. Its answer has to do with the inability of the reform movement, which had first emerged in a context of imperial hegemony, to retain its power of critique. Soon this movement succumbed to an apologetic, defensive discourse that undermined the prospects for a true religious revival.

THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE: Several researchers who are aware of the use that politics has made of religion, in early Islamic history as in modern times, have taken a critical look at our past and analysed the evidence they could cull from the available literature and cultural sources. This approach can be clearly seen in Taha Hussein's history of Arab literature and in his historic research which he published in such books as *Ala Hamish Al-Sirah* (Footnotes to the Prophet's Life), *Al-Fitnah Al-Kubrah* (The Great Sedition), *Al-Shaykhan* (The Two Sheikhs), and *Ali wa Banuh* (Ali and His Sons). The same approach is evident in Ahmed Amin's *Fajr Al-Islam* (The Dawn of Islam) and *Dhuhur Al-Islam* (The Emergence of Islam). Abdel-Hamid El-Ibadi made valuable contributions to the political history of Islam, as did Amin El-Khuli, Mohamed Ahmed Khalafallah, Bint El-Shati', Mustafa Abdelq

